



# A ‘missionary impulse’ for Scotland today

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Research shows the church to be in decline across the board. Yet the search and yearning of our postmodern society for hope and identity is obvious. Our faith communities are a prophetic resource that is much needed. As Pope Francis says in *Evangelii Gaudium*<sup>1</sup> (EG),

I dream of a “missionary option”, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelisation of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation. (EG 27)

How then do we centre ourselves on pastoral mission? What might that look like in Scotland today?



Pope Francis addresses a reality many of us recognise when he emphasised:

More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: “Give them something to eat” (*Mk 6:37*). (EG 49)

This leads him to ‘dream of a “missionary option”, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything’ (EG 27). An ‘impulse’ suggests energy, movement and a direction of travel. This begs the question: what might a ‘missionary impulse’ look like in Scotland today?

We, like most of the developed world, are experiencing a tidal wave of change. So much is this the case, that Michael Paul Gallagher asserts there is effectively a generational change every five years.<sup>2</sup> This new era is commonly described as postmodern; a recognition that we have moved on from modernity but are not yet living in a time which has achieved its own delineation. While difficult to define,<sup>3</sup> nevertheless, traits of postmodernity such as greater plurality, ambiguity, moral relativity and fragmentation are widely recognisable. In ministry we meet people in increasingly complex family situations and engage with people without theological language. We are often on the front-line of raw and painful situations with people whose ‘horizon of meaning’ is insecure.<sup>4</sup> Yet, undeniably, postmodernity offers many gifts, not least, the contemporary understandings of religious truth by critical theory, feminist interpretation, and liberationist thought.

These exemplify a ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’, which asserts that much of what is appealed to authoritatively as ‘tradition’ may be hermeneutically distorted. This recognition is surely a Godly nudge towards greater truth. The task then is to discern what possibilities there are for spiritual growth in postmodernity. Michael Paul Gallagher suggests postmodernity has two different faces. One he calls ‘the postmodernity of the street’, and in terms of spiritual diagnosis he finds it a powerful source of cultural desolation today. Here he finds and

names three wounds of the postmodernity characteristic of our time: a wounded imagination, a wounded memory, and a wounded sense of belonging. For him these are indicators of desolation, in its spiritual sense.<sup>5</sup> The other face of postmodernity, however he describes as a postmodern sensibility of ‘searching’. In David Tracy’s view, here the postmodern sensibility is retrieving a sense of God that is relational, ethical-political, prophetic and disruptive.<sup>6</sup> Is it possible then to embrace this movement in our ecclesiology? One response comes from Nicholas Healy. He advocates practical-prophetic ecclesiology. In his book, *Church, World and Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*,<sup>7</sup> he criticises blueprint ecclesiologies, urging instead a move to prioritise the concrete reality of the church.

In order to achieve this, Gerard Mannion advocates an ecclesiology that puts pastoral needs and community enhancement at the forefront of the priorities and policies. He supports a model of authority and leadership based on collaboration and service leading to an increased appreciation that the community of the faithful as a whole is the legitimate bearer of authority. In order to achieve this, he calls for ‘conversation’ and the building and maintenance of partnerships, both within and without one’s own Christian and religious and existential traditions.<sup>8</sup> In this time of diminishment an alternative response is offered, Gerard Mannion suggests, in the macro-ecumenism spoken of by David Tracy.<sup>9</sup>

Another dimension of postmodern ministry arose from the Emerging Models Project in the United States. Participants had been identified by their dioceses as thought leaders in the field. It appeared that there was surprising diversity between the parishes and instead of new models what emerged were a ‘set of practices’. Prominent among them was the concept of a total ministering community. How then do we translate these ideas into a missionary impulse? I consider that we need a church that is authentic, relational, discerning and inclusive. We must be authentic to face the naked searching of postmodern seekers. As reflected by Trinitarian theology,<sup>10</sup> we need a relational approach to ministry in order to develop total ministering communities. We need to learn to discern, to listen, to be people of ‘contemplative conversation’, not noisy discourse.<sup>11</sup> As Sandra Schneiders noted:

[...] the ones who stayed were tested by fire. [...] They were experiencing a deep purification of any sense of spiritual superiority [...], of elitism, of corporate power and influence, of ‘most favoured status’ or mysterious specialness in the Church. [...] They had to find the taproot of their vocation [...] in the core of their spirituality, face to face with the One to whom they had given their lives [...].<sup>12</sup>

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*. See [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html)
- <sup>2</sup> Michael Paul Gallagher, “Catholic Identity and Today’s Culture”, Keynote Address: Living Theology 2006, Ushaw College, 22nd July 2006.
- <sup>3</sup> Paul Avis, *A Church Drawing Near: Spirituality and Mission in a Post-Christian Culture* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 65.
- <sup>4</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josephine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), no. 125. Nietzsche’s madman suggests here that the ‘horizon of meaning’ has been wiped away. I would suggest that for most people it has not been wiped away but is much less secure than in the past.
- <sup>5</sup> Michael Paul Gallagher, “Christian Identity in a Postmodern Age: A Perspective from Lonergan”, in *Christian Identity in a Postmodern Age: Celebrating the Legacies of Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan*, ed. Declan Marmion (Dublin: Veritas, 2005), 146.
- <sup>6</sup> Michael Paul Gallagher, *Clashing Symbols: An Introduction to Faith and Culture* (London: DLT, 2003), 112.
- <sup>7</sup> Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

- <sup>8</sup> Gerard Mannion, “Ecclesiology and Postmodernity: A New Paradigm for the Roman Catholic Church?”, *New Blackfriars* 85 (2004): 304–28.
- <sup>9</sup> Gerard Mannion, *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity: Questions for the Church in Our Time*, (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2007), 225.
- <sup>10</sup> Edward Hahnenberg, *Ministries: A Relational Approach* (New York: Crossroads, 2003), 35.
- <sup>11</sup> Donald Cozzens, *Faith That Dares to Speak* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2004), 115.
- <sup>12</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders, “Why We Stay(ed)”, *Concilium* 2010/1: 119–30.